DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 172 489 EC 114 883

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TITLE Use of the ABIC in Special Education: Problems and Solutions.
SPONS AGENCY Texas Education Agency, Austin.
PUB DATE Aug 78
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Meeting of the American Psychological Association (Toronto, Canada, August, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adjustment (to Environment); *Behavior Rating Scales; *Classification; *Handicapped Children; *Mentally Handicapped; Student Placement; Testing Problems; *Test Validity
IDENTIFIERS *Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews and critiques the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC) from the perspective of its utility in the assessment of adaptive behavior for special education eligibility. It is explained that the ABIC, a parent interview consisting of questions about a child's home and community activities, has recently been normed and used on a sample of low-income Mexican American children in the Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD). The paper focuses on a thorough investigation of the problems encountered by CCISD in using the ABIC for classification of children as mentally retarded. Problems and limitations of the ABIC for classifications of children as mentally retarded. Problems and limitations of the ABIC are pointed out for two major areas: failure to take into account environmental factors which may affect the acquisition of adaptive behavior, and structural characteristics which inhibit the usefulness of ABIC scores. These problems, as well as theoretical and philosophical issues, are used to support the contention that a new adaptive behavior instrument is needed. (Author/SBH)

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ED172489

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Use of the ABIC in Special Education: Problems and Solutions[1]

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[1]Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, September, 1978.

EC111883

Use of the ABIC in Special Education: Problems and Solutions[1]

When the Pluralistic Diagnostic Team project began in Corpus Christi in June, 1976, we received permission from Jane Mercer and June Lewis, co-authors of the System of Multicultural Pluralistic Assessment (1977), to investigate the need for local norms for their Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC) and to use the ABIC in the special education assessment of mental retardation. We are indebted to Dr. Mercer for the opportunity we have had to investigate the construct and the assessment of adaptive behavior, using as a base one of the newest and most innovative approaches to that assessment--the ABIC.

A number of conclusions have resulted from our use of the ABIC in research and in special education assessment. Among these conclusions is the fact that virtually all children who were "declassified" as mentally retarded, using the ABIC and the California norms, in our professional judgment, do not appear to be retarded. Therefore, the ABIC appears to do its job well, that of helping to identify the "six-hour" retarded child. However, we have also concluded that there are several identifiable problems and limitations in the use of the ABIC in the assessment of mental retardation for special education eligibility. These problems and limitations are found in two major areas: (1) failure to take into account environmental factors which may affect the acquisition of adaptive behaviors and (2) structural characteristics which inhibit the usefulness of ABIC scores.

[1]Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association, Toronto, September, 1978.

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

We have discovered a significant number of children who score within the mentally retarded range on the ABIC (more than two standard deviations below the mean for children of the same age) who, in our professional judgment, should not be classified mentally retarded. The low ABIC scores for these children can be traced to identifiable factors, other than mental retardation, which have inhibited their acquisition of adaptive behaviors. These factors include a child's motivation and opportunities to learn adaptive behaviors--crucial determinants of whether a child manifests his/her intelligence in particular adaptive behaviors.

Just as Mercer (1977) sees a need to consider the child's opportunities to learn school skills in the interpretation of WISC-R scores, there is a need to consider a child's opportunities to learn adaptive behaviors in the interpretation of adaptive behavior scores.

For example, research has shown that children from one ethnic-socio-economic group in Corpus Christi--low-income Mexican-Americans--score significantly lower on the ABIC than any other ethnic-socioeconomic group in Corpus Christi and significantly lower than the three ethnic groups in California (Gridley and Mastenbrook, 1977).

Although we can control for the lower score by using separate norms on the ABIC for this group, the ABIC does not tell us "why" the scores of this group were lower. It appears that the reason children from low-income Mexican-American homes in Corpus Christi score lower on the ABIC than children from

other groups is that they have fewer opportunities and lower parental expectations for the acquisition of adaptive behavior skills. However, in order to make this determination, it was necessary to ask questions above and beyond those on the ABIC. The "no opportunity-not allowed" index on the ABIC does not work well in providing this information because it results in the mere lowering of an adaptive behavior score, rather than an explanation of why there is no opportunity.

Besides failing to identify lack of opportunity due to socioeconomic or cultural background, the ABIC also fails to single out factors in a particular child's home environment, apart from SES or culture, which may inhibit the acquisition of school and adaptive behavior skills. Neither does the ABIC address motivational factors which contribute to a failure to learn certain adaptive behaviors.

One of our goals in adaptive behavior assessment is to determine possible reasons, besides mental retardation, for a child's lack of adaptive behavior skills. The fact that the use of an ABIC score as the sole adaptive behavior criterion would, in some cases, result in the erroneous classification of a child as mentally retarded emphasizes that it is not enough to know that a child doesn't have a particular adaptive behavior skill. One must check for factors, other than mental retardation, which might be responsible for a child's low functioning. This information is crucial for proper interpretation of adaptive behavior scores, decisions concerning the most appropriate educational placement for the child, and the development of appropriate intervention strategies for the child. Because the ABIC was not

designed to provide this type of information, it has been necessary for us to gather it informally during the parent interview.

STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS

Certain structural characteristics of the ABIC have also been a source of problems in the use of the instrument in special education assessment. Two principal problem areas are method of administration and question content.

The method of administration of the ABIC was designed so that, except in extreme cases, all questions are not asked of every parent. After a number of "non-age graded" questions are asked, questions are then begun at the child's age level, in reverse order, until a baseline is reached--after eight consecutive "1's" or "2's" are recorded. All questions below the baseline are automatically credited as two-point responses (Mercer and Lewis, 1977). Thus, there is an assumption of developmental sequencing in this method of administration and scoring. In special education assessment we have found that the scaled scores for the subscales of the ABIC are often spurious due to credit given for questions below the child's baseline. In some cases a child's highest scaled score may be in a subscale in which only two or three questions were actually asked. Given the important role that lack of opportunity plays in the acquisition of particular adaptive behavior skills and the uneven skills development characteristic of children referred for special education, the usefulness of scaled scores from the ABIC is questionable.

The determination of question content using the "social systems" approach (Mercer, 1977) has resulted in questions concerning adaptive behavior skills which are a function, not of the child's ability or lack of it, but a function

of the opportunities existing in the child's environment. Many of the children who are evaluated for classification as mentally retarded come from homes which are not typical in terms of the expectations of the family or the opportunities the child has to learn many socially-valued skills in the home, school, and community. Many of the adaptive behaviors assessed by the ABIC are behaviors which are so contingent upon the opportunities available to the child that the absence of these skills should not be a determinant in the classification of the child as mentally retarded. For example, in the subscale concerning non-academic school roles (Mercer and Lewis, 1977), the question about whether or not the child helps out in the school library or cafeteria has little to do with his/her ability to do so, but everything to do with the make-up of the school plant and common practices in the child's school. The subscale concerning community activities may be the worst culprit in assessing opportunity rather than ability. Activities included in this subscale are more often a function of the family's income and interest in such activities than a function of the child's skills. For instance, whether or not a child joins clubs or collects for charities or the needy is primarily contingent upon the family's attitude toward such things and whether or not the opportunity to do so has ever arisen.

Another problem with the content of questions on the ABIC concerns those questions which appear to assess a child's personality and social adjustment--questions about getting along with others, frustration tolerance, bad dreams, etc. Many of these questions are found in the "non-age graded" section, although others can be found interspersed throughout the ABIC, oftentimes interfering greatly with the attainment of a baseline or ceiling. However, this

is not the major criticism of these questions. Although information gathered from these questions is important in determining the way in which a child adapts to his/her environment, personality and social adjustments are aspects of adaptation which do not necessarily reflect the child's abilities. In fact, a child's withdrawn or aggressive behaviors may be a successful and intelligent adaptive style for his/her home environment. Therefore, personality and social adjustment questions should not be included in the norm evaluated adaptive behaviors used in decisions concerning the classification of children as mentally retarded. The inability to get along with others should in no way be used as a basis for classifying a child mentally retarded.

IMPETUS FOR A NEW SCALE

It is not our intention to let these criticisms obscure the fact that Mercer and Lewis, through their pioneer effort, have brought the role of adaptive behavior in non-biased assessment to national attention and have produced the most useful adaptive behavior scale to date. In providing us the opportunity to look critically at their scale, Mercer and Lewis have provided the impetus for the development of a new adaptive behavior scale built upon the firm foundation which they have laid.

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